

INTERVIEWEE: BEN & LORRAINE VALLAT, JR.

INTERVIEWER: Patricia Young

SUBJECT:

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TRANSCRIBER: Linda A. Jantzen

PY: Interview with Ben Vallat, Jr. and Lorraine Vallat for the Historical Society of Palm Desert Oral History Project on May 14, 1980, at four-thirty in the afternoon at their home in Rancho Mirage.

Let's start with how you came to the desert area, Rancho Mirage.

BV: Well, the reason we moved down here was my father had developed an area here, starting in the early thirties. And right after the war, why we moved down here to take care of the ranch and other ranches around, too. So that was in 1945. So now do you want to know a little history of where it began or . . .

PY: Yes.

BV: Well, there was a group of people from Santa Monica which Clanceys were, but R. P. Davey was the one that actually found the area to start developing it. And

these businessmen in Santa Monica were attracted by the fact that Coachella Valley was the only place in North America where you can commercially grow dates. And at that time they were beginning to get a reputation of very fine grapefruit, so they decided that, they felt that it would be a profitable venture. So it was Bert Davey, he acquired, I think, eighty acres down on Clancey Lane and organized the Del Sol Water Company. And a friend of his and a partner of my father's. E. McIntyre, he got this eighty acres up here that borders Country Club Drive and Bob Hope, which should have been kept Rio Del Sol really, as you've probably heard many times. So they organized the corporation called the San Jacinto Water Company and proceeded to develop the property and first drilling a well that just off the southeast corner of Bob Hope and Country Club. And at two, at a depth of about two hundred feet they found an abundance of good water. So they equipped it with a pump with a fifty-horse motor, which was a pretty big one in those days. And started the, first they planted the tamarisk around the perimeter, all around the perimeter, and down the middle. And then they came to the leveling process. And most of that and this eighty acre were done by mule

and a fresno, it's a scraper and a bucket-type thing that would drag a yard or a yard and a half of dirt from the highest to the lowest. And, of course, it took a long time to do it. But in the meantime the windbreaks were developing. They had found out from the pioneers, earlier pioneers, that the first thing you should do is grow a windbreak because that was the biggest hazard of developing down here, as you can see right today. So they got, they had a co-op that was headed by Mr. McIntyre and the expenses were all divided in the developing and planning of it. They got their date shoots down in the lower end of the valley in mostly Daglet-Noor dates, which is the most common variety. So there planted that thirty-foot spacings, and that was a lot of space to see a little shoot in the ground. So they interplanted with citrus, mostly grapefruit. It takes a date shoot seven or eight years before you really getting any production off of it. While in the citrus, why four years you have, so that's what that was attracted for. So it . . .

LV: They used tangarines for the border crops, too.

BV: Well, yes. They also used the citrus for windbreak.

But the tamarisk was the most acceptable windbreak plant

because it grew so fast.

LV: Very little water. No water.

BV: Well, anyway, in the process there are parcels of land that were sold from five acres to twenty acres to make up the eighty. And all of them at that time were from Santa Monica. In fact, between Clancey Lane or Del Sol Water this was little Santa Monica here. Practically everybody was from Santa Monica. But anyway, time went on and the dates and citrus developed and the parcels changed hands and so on. They had some real lean years. Of course, they were trying to develop this in the middle of the depression, but they were able to get some funds from the Federal Land Bank to help them along or they couldn't have gone ahead with it. But anyway the dates developed and the profitable years came when the, of course, in the war years and you would see very good prices. And then when we came down, right after the war, why the date market went to pot, so to speak. But still making enough to maintain the growth, so that brings it up to today.

PY: So McIntyre owned the . . .

BV: He had a . . .

PY: Southeast corner.

BV: Yes, well, he did have the twenty acres. He had twenty acres, and he headed the group so to speak and managed it, managed the farming and the developing of it. And the other people like my uncle owned ten acres. My brother-in-law owned five. And, oh, Adolphe Freezi owned five, yes, Freezi, and Campbell and McCanless, but parcels varied in that eventually we sold off everything but the acre here where they live on. But Dad planted all this, the dates from here out to Country Club and down to the end of let's see, he planted those, but shortly afterwards he sold off parcels. And eventually only kept ten acres here. Then, of course, when we came down, we had twenty acres where Wilshire Palms is?

LV: Yes.

BV: They planted grapes in there. In the meantime, well, in the early thirties Doc Gurley planted the sixty acres out here in front of us. And that goes from here down to Clancey Lane and filled that in with grapes. And he had sixty acres of real nice Thompsons and Cardinals. So he had grapes, dates, and citrus there. It was a good life for a long while.

LV: Yes, right now we've got palm trees. See all the beautiful land. Gobbled up by thousands and walls.

PY: Do you know who owned the property before it was developed? Some person own it, or was it . . .

BV: Well, I think it was a big tract of land. I think it was a whole section, and R. P. Davey arranged to buy, originally he bought a hundred and sixty down there. Then there was eighty acres up here.

LV: Was that part railroad land?

BV: It could have been. I'm not sure.

LV: Because we had the tracks over here, you see, and every other section, yes, was . . .

BV: Well, I don't know, but either one, it could have been either one; I don't know.

LV: It wasn't Indian land, that's for sure. But it could have . . .

PY: You were saying tracks, where are they?

LV: Railroad tracks, you know, down here.

BV: She pointed here, way out there by . . .

LV: By I-10, yes. So that's over this way. I mean it comes over. I mean this is part of the . . .

BV: Well, when we . . . yes.

LV: Could have been railroad.

BV: When we came down here, there was a sand road from the Rancho Mirage through the wash, and up to here where you could turn in. Now this road, Rio Del Sol, only ran up

a little beyond Country Club to Paul Kersten's property which is now the Springs. And that's as far as it went. There wasn't any Country Club. So our only exit and entrance was the Rio Del Sol through the wash. Whenever it rained very hard, you know what happened, we'd be stranded (chuckle) for days. The first summer I was down here we had a terrible storm that only lasted forty-five minutes. It was in July. And it began with a terrific wind and ended up with a cloudburst. But it knocked down about two hundred big trees. If it didn't uproot them, it snapped them off.

LV: He said it sounded like breaking match sticks, to taking a match stick and breaking it.

BV: But those are the hazards of the desert.

LV: We have pictures of that. Well, you came down the road there. That was all snapped; that was all laying down, all snapped up and had to be planted there.

BV: So Mama brought up two youngsters up here in this little house that you haven't seen.

LV: Yes, you went by . . .

BV: And it was a little block house that we added onto and moved into when we came down here. But in those days, too, there's just the swamp cooler.

LV: I can remember your dad talking about the corner of Clancey Lane and Bob Hope Drive, right there at that very corner where Tevis' now own.

BV: That was Bert Davies, yes.

LV: Yes. Dad, they would pitch a tent and have a tin roof on it. Then they'd have a sprinkler going all the time on the roofs so they'd keep it cool. That's the way they kept, that was their first air conditioning.

PY: Oh, you mean they would go out and live in a tent when it was hot?

LV: Oh, yes. Well, that's what they lived in when they came down here and did their work and things, and they had this tent over here.

BV: They used to come down here quite often from Santa Monica to see how the work was progressing and try to do a little work themselves. Most of the time they would, when the weather was hot, they'd just stay up at night until it cooled off and then go to bed because just couldn't, when it was humid, you know how it is now.

LV: But I often think about the tin roof and how that was smart, they kept the roof cool and that's what you tried to do, keep your ceilings.

BV: Well, the swamp . . .

PY: Jim Lofland?

LV: Jim Waldon. He lived in the corner house there, right across from Mrs. Clancey, little white house there. And Jim was the manager of the

BV: Yes, he was the superintendent of the work, the ranch work. I mean he helped the workers and paid them and so on and so on.

LV: Yes, he should remember because he really came down here, he and Nell, his wife.

BV: Yes, he . . .

LV: And they had one daughter, Martha. Sure, the Waldons were very much a part of this agricultural development.

PY: It's interesting to me that, if they were interested in dates and grapefruit, that they would come to the central valley rather than going down to the lower valley. Do you know why? Wasn't that a risk?

BV: Well, you know, I think they were looking for good soil, too. And Bert Davey had come into this area exploring around, and he could see the stratas of the soil in the wash there. And he felt, now this is it. That there's rich soil here. And if there's water, we're in business. Well, they only had to go to a depth of approximately two hundred feet to get all the water they needed, and

excellent water. So they stayed up at this end mainly because, well, one of the main things was the soil conditions up here, were better than down the wash. There was a considerable amount of salt in the soil down at the lower end of the valley.

LV: And it was much further, too. And this way it was closer for them to . . .

BV: And it seemed to be in more of an attractive area right around Rancho Mirage. Not much was there then. I mean, I don't know whether they even had a post office then.

LV: No, because they came up from Indio.

BV: There was a real estate. Oh, that's right.

LV: Fergie would bring our mail to us. We had box numbers all along the . . . We had it up there right at the vel, Highway 111 there was a row of boxes there where you got your mail. Golly, I can remember that wash filling up and going across in a pickup.

BV: Many times bank to bank.

LV: And I can remember the mayor because they lived in that house now that's been rebuilt. They had a fire and they rebuilt it, the mayor's house. And I remember Hilda's husband Don saying, "Now, Lorraine, when you get down at the bottom there, just keep going. Keep it going."

So I meant to gun it, so I put a brand new forty-six pickup blew. And I went across, I had the two children with me, and I went across there. And I don't know why I thought I had to go fast, but I thought I better because it was really coming. And, of course, it had worn a big hole, and I hit that hole, and I couldn't see a thing. (laughter) The windshield was all mud. The kids were on the floor, but I went across. And I thought, "Oh, Ben's going to just kill me when he sees this pickup." So I got some water to wash it off of it, but so the next, when I came back after getting the, we had to have the newspaper, absolutely had to have the paper on Sunday, came back, why it, I was sensible and I knew how to handle it. I just went across quietly, and it was fine. But, oh, boy! We've been stranded. We were stranded out there.

BV: For three or four days. In fact, that big storm we had was sort of a local sort of a thing. And we were hit hardest on this side of the wash. So it was several days before anybody knew how serious it was because there was enough rain to cut out the road in the wash. So we didn't have any power or any phone lines then because everything was washed out. So finally the outside world

found out about it.

PY: When was this?

BV: Forty-six. Did you get, I think those pictures in my box.

LV: Box, I'll show them to you. Let me get you some more water while I'm up.

PY: Oh, thank you. Where was I. Oh. Was interplanting common then? You were talking about interplanting the grapefruit with the dates then.

BV: Yes.

PY: Was that common at that time?

BV: Well, yes, as far as I know around here it was because, and then later as the date trees matured most of them took the citrus out. Because the citrus in between the palms created more humidity, which dates, they don't want any rain or humidity to speak of. So a lot of these growers took them out. We took them out of here and then put them back in. When we came down, why we put in grapefruit right here, between the palms. So they aren't that old. But these date palms are close to fifty years old. But, you know, a date shoot can only, to get the true variety, you have to cut them from a, as you know, and it's quite a chore.

PY: So you planted most of the dates around here then?

BV: Well, we got the dates, the shoots, from the lower end of the valley. And the whole acreage except this five acres right behind us Dad planted in valencia oranges. And the whole rest of the eighty acres was in dates. So it was quite a date garden.

PY: Dan Callahan was telling me that on his uncle's ranch, Hank Gogerty's ranch, that every time they would plant citrus, they'd have to replant it the next year because it would keep getting wiped out.

BV: Well, that was because of the frost out there.

LV: Now you came by the corner there, and it was just to your right, that first piece there. Those pictures. That was McIntyre's.

BV: Yes.

PY: Are these like tornadoes that come through here?

BV: Well, this seemed to be a rolling because every tree that you could put a compass on it, it was this way. It came out of the hills, of course, and they were all laying in exactly the same direction. But I think you can see how they broke off. Some of them just . . . This is a swath of McIntyre's piece. Why it confined itself to that, I don't know. But we only lost twelve

out in this grove. In here there were a hundred and twenty-six that went down. This doesn't show the stubs. Well, it does here. See, that broke off instead of uprooting them, it would just break them off.

LV: You said it sounded like taking matches and breaking them. This is Ben's father, who pioneered the area.

PY: Oh.

LV: Now he could tell you stories. He was a . . . He's a storyteller anyway. He was a storyteller.

BV: Right. For hours he could tell you.

LV: Interesting, interesting man, had a fascinating life.

BV: But those people were real pioneers to come out in this sand and the slow process of realizing anything out of it. It was terrific.

LV: I'm going to show you something. This is the house next door, and this is where Mother and Dad built. We built this first, and they built next year. This is fifty-six. They built this is fifty-seven, so they were going to put some citrus trees on the other side of the pool over here. And our son was down there digging a hole, and he was down in the hole and all of a sudden he came up like a shot. And this is why he came up like a shot. (laughter) It was a gopher snake.

BV: Beautiful gopher snake.

LV: We didn't kill him. We just took him and put him and put him in the citrus over here and let him go, but
(laughter)

PY: A snake.

BV: Scare you to death. (laughter)

PY: Absolutely. (laughter) I'd take a picture of that, too.

LV: Ben's brother's about six, this is his brother, he's about six feet tall so you see how long that snake is. And he was an old buddy. I hate to see anybody kill somebody like that would be terrible.

BV: The poor guy. He was just trying to keep out.

LV: He had so many bumps in him where he'd been down, you know, getting the gophers, which, as I say, they're good to have around.

BV: So, that's part of the story. I don't know what else you might want.

PY: What did you actually manage. You said that there were other ranches around here that you managed.

BV: Well, I came down here to actually just take care of Dad's acreage, but in the meantime, like I used to irrigate the other ranches, and that's all. And just to get a little

extra money. We survived for I don't know how many years on that. Then I went to work for a produce company in Indio in 1950.

PY: Who were your neighbors around here at that point?

LV: We didn't have any.

BV: Well,

LV: We had a Mexican family.

BV: Don Willard, and that was a house right here. Of course, these were all non-residents.

PY: Oh, you mean you were the only residents in the area.

LV: Yes.

BV: McIntyres, they had the house right up in the corner of Bob Hope and it's still there, the adobe. That was the original house. That house, that was built in the early thirties. And that's where our well was, original well. Now our well is out on this road at Deep Canyon.

LV: And remember they had the little frame house that they lived in, and the adobe was for the help.

BV: Yes.

PY: Now the adobe, is that on Bob Hope?

BV: Yes.

LV: Yes.

BV: Right on the corner of this corner of Bob Hope and . . .

The frame house is torn down.

LV: But the Willards you mentioned. They were . . .

BV: Well, the other residents were the Hyatts.

LV: Hyatts, that was the only . . .

BV: The Hyatts had ten acres down, yes . . .

LV: At the end of Vallat Road.

BV: Yes.

PY: Now which is Vallat Road?

LV: You crossed it.

BV: But you can't get it in.

LV: That little corner house as you came down that cross road, that was Vallat Road.

PY: Oh, yes.

LV: Then this new subdivider cut it off by putting up a big wall and took Vallat Road away, the name, which he shouldn't have done. I would have fought for it, but Ben doesn't believe in that. Let it go, but . . .

BV: Well.

LV: No, I would never . . .

BV: We weren't actually using the road.

LV: I don't care. It could have been made, it's still on maps, was a bus stop and so forth. No, it should never have been . . .

PY: It was a bus stop?

BV: Well, no, just a school bus.

LV: For the children for school. All the Mexican children and our two children and the Hyatts. Why they'd come over to the corner there and the bus would pick them up.

BV: But those days, true, youngsters were always barefooted, hard to get shoes on them to go to school. I think they did start off with shoes, then they came home carrying them. (laughter)

LV: One thing about having children out here, you knew where they were at all times because you had to take them and you had to pick them up. And all their friends lived in Palm Desert. And they certainly didn't bring them out here. We did all the traveling.

BV: But everybody in the family worked. used to drive the tractor once in awhile and irrigate. And John, as soon as he was old enough, drove the tractor. And he irrigated quite a bit, and swore that he'd never be a farmer. But now he's managing twelve hundred acres of grapes in San Joaquin. (laughter)

PY: In the blood.

LV: Here they are.

PY: Oh!

LV: That's the ones that say you can pet her now because she's got the ball in her mouth.

PY: What beauties!

LV: And now he's a farmer and got twelve hundred acres of grapes, so . . .

BV: He's the one that never was going to be a farmer.

LV: Anybody could turn off a valve and turn a valve on. Didn't have to have brains to do that.

BV: Well, now did Danny give you any information?

PY: He gave me quite a bit. We talked a lot about Desert Aire.

BV: Oh, yes. Well, that was a big project, and that was one of our favorite places to go.

LV: Oh, yes.

BV: Gee, it was wonderful there.

LV: The airplanes and the compass room.

BV: That was our main restaurant. Wonderful food.

LV: You never appreciate it until it's gone. You just take it for granted. You should never take things for granted.

BV: Well, see, Doc Gogerty, he had, and he has his brother, Dr. Gogerty, he has the grapes right in conjunction with ours out here, but it's now Wilshire Palms now.

LV: He had the first part of Wilshire Palms as you came up

the Country Club. And then Doc Gurley's was right, I mean Doc Gogerty.

BV: Doc Gogerty was Hank's brother, yes.

LV: Yes, he had that other.

PY: And then Gogerty's house was right on the corner?

BV: No, that was Hank's? And he had grapes that were planted early. They were planted in the thirties.

PY: He was saying that there was no phone service out here.

BV: For a long time.

LV: Well, we had it the day we moved in.

BV: Did we?

LV: Yes. Hooked up the day we moved in. Martha saw to that for us because of Jane.

BV: Yes, we had a daughter with a heart condition.

LV: So we had a phone

BV: It was a party line, of course.

LV: We had ten people or eight people or something with different rings on it, you know. Of course, we had that in Ventura when we were first married living at the beach. It was ten. Then it got down to eight. Then you only got four rings and it was four rings on the other side. But private lines were very, no, there was no way of getting a private line there. So we had people

on our lines. Most of the Mexicans always had a phone.

BV: Don't talk about my friends.

LV: Well, I know what you're going to tell me. It wasn't even fun to listen to them because you couldn't understand them, you know. Party lines sometimes could be interesting. Doc Gurley, I've heard him talk several times on his line and it was interesting. When he bought that place over there by Indian Wells and houses were on the hill, telling his wife what he bought.

BV: But anyway, most of the owners right around here were non-residents and the houses were occupied by the help mainly.

PY: So when you spoke of the Mexicans in the area, they were people . . .

LV: That worked on the ranches. That's all my children had to play with is five Mexican children. And they never learned the language because their mother said, "Don't talk Spanish. You talk English," so they learned to speak English when they go to school.

BV: You tell them.

LV: Mrs. couldn't speak English, so she wouldn't talk to our children. But she wouldn't allow her children to talk and she wanted them to learn English. And ours

never did learn to speak Spanish, which was too bad.

Used to go down there and hang around. Finally Mrs.

would say to one of the children, "You tell them to go home. We're eating." (laughter) But they loved the tortillas, you know, and beans. They just rather eat down there than they would their own house.

PY: Most of the help then actually lived on these ranches?

BV: Yes. There were enough houses around the area. Well, we'd trade back and forth on our labor.

LV: What about the wetbacks that used to come? (laughter)

BV: And then, well, yes, then the Mexican wetbacks would come and they'd live in the tamarisk, you know, out of the way so they wouldn't be caught. But most of the housing in the early forties right after the war was let for labor. Clanceys had theirs. E. P. Nitchenger, Santa Monica, had his. And McIntyre had his. And Don Willard, he kept his open.

PY: When you say they kept them open?

BV: I mean, he had two houses. One was a Mexican family Lorraine was talking about. And then he had a little house that was, it's still there, but now it has help in it. But they sold the ranch. This property around here, most of it has changed hands a half a dozen times

since it was started.

PY: So most of these people weren't even coming down for vacations down here.

LV: Oh, no.

BV: Well, they'd come down just to look at their ranch.

LV: Yes, in the winter.

BV: And maybe stay at the White Sun or some motel. Oh, they'd come down every once in awhile.

LV: They had friends. They would stay with their friends. Richey, or what was it, Don Willard's next up there. He and his wife, they always stayed with friends when they came down.

: Oh, they stayed with the Willards. Willards often because they were very close friends

BV: Everyone that sold, I guess, figures now. Of course, they should have held out. (chuckle)

PY: Do you still have the ten acres here?

BV: No, we sold everything now but this one acre. We sold everything up to this, well, it was a two-acre block, and Dad built this house next door. And then when Mother passed away and he moved back to Washington, D.C., why we bought it. And then sold it to the Wilsons, who are living there now. So we're left with an acre with

the house and everything.

LV: That's enough.

PY: I'm sure it is. I'm sure. When you've got to keep it up.

What were most of the people from Santa Monica doing?

BV: They were businessmen. One, E. P. Nittenger, had the biggest plumbing contractor. And Don Willard was in the investment deal. And most of them were connected with real estate and development. But McIntyre and my father farmed up in San Joaquin Valley in the early twenties, cotton and alfalfa and so on. And even before they developed here, they had property over in Blythe that they grew cotton and so on. So they had a little experience in the farming business.

LV: I think your father was a mining engineer, too. He was an engineer.

BV: And, let's see, well, Doug Hopson, my uncle, he more or less retired. And Adolphe Freezi, they invented and built or made thermometers. Was their main, they were a minimum-maximum thermomenters that are still being used. That shows, not the maximum, but the minimum. And every rancher in the valley still uses those for their minimum readings on a cold night. And, let's see.

LV: Bill Wright was an attorney.

BV: Bill Wright was an attorney, yes.

: He was a brother-in-law in the family.

BV: McCanless.

: Or son-in-law.

BV: McCanless originally owned . . .

LV: Bill Wright?

BV: No. You know Gene Roberts?

PY: I'm going to interview him Monday.

BV: Well, he'll tell you a lot of it. He was secretary of the water company, Sunny Water Company, for quite a few years.

: Gene came out in fifty-three?

BV: Well, he bought the ranch in a snow storm. And I think it was forty-nine. It was either forty-nine or fifty. But he did. He come down to the Nittenger's house, a group of them.

LV: Every year.

BV: Every year, and they'd have, well, just to relax between Christmas and New Year's. And so he heard about the ranch over here for sale. So Jim Waldon owned it at the time. And so Jim, I remember he brought him over and it was one of those days it was snowing. (laughter) I think of snow. We had about a four-hour snow storm and he

bought it. (laughter) I don't know whether he remembers that it was snowing, but it was the day he looked at it.

LV: Yes. In case he doesn't say that, ask him if there were any weather conditions when he bought the ranch. (laughter)

BV: We climbed a lot of date trees and did the pollenating because we finally bought the five acres right across from him to the east. And so we

LV: And we bought that from Bill Wright.

BV: Operated together there. And Gene did a lot of his own work, irrigating and tree work.

LV: As well as being a contractor.

BV: Yes. Oh, yes, he had his contracting.

LV: But he wasn't doing that much down here. He got in with Cliff on Sun Lodges, the first Sun Lodges, but he came down here to retire, I mean to relax. This was the idea. And then that's when his wife Marian got so irritated because he was doing . . .

BV: Don't you tell any stories.

LV: Well, because he was supposed to come down here to relax. Instead, why, he built a house. And then he was able to stay down instead of driving back and forth all the time to take care of his Sun Lodge with Cliff. So then he built the house so they could come down. But he worked

all the time he was down there.

BV: Well, he built a lot of houses.

LV: Yes, and from there he went into other things, yes.

BV: He had a good contracting business going out in Pacific Palisades about that time.

LV: Sure. Because he said here he bought this to relax, and all he does is work down here.

BV: Well, he wasn't one to sit around.

LV: No.

BV: Not Gene.

LV: No, no.

BV: But anyway, he can show you who he sold it to. Of course, there wasn't any Country Club Road for years. Let's see, when was . . .

LV: They put that in for you. George Burton got that, too.

BV: I know. When was George a supervisor?

LV: What years was . . .

BV: In the fifties, middle fifties?

PY: Fifty-two, fifty-three.

BV: Yes, all right. That's when Country Club went. And actually, Bob Hope Drive over to Ramon, this was promoted by the grape growers here. And that was in the early fifties or late forties. Anyway, between Gogerty and

Gurley and Kersten and Albert Peck, they wanted a road over, there was a siding over here on the railroad at Edom. It was right close to Thousand Palms. So they promoted the county to build a road across the dunes. And they built about, oh, it must be, well, I guess it's four and a half miles. And when they opened that road, they had the biggest party that you've ever seen. (chuckle)

LV: Oh, golly. They have the Firehouse Five.

BV: They had a band.

LV: The Firehouse Five.

BV: They opened it at night, though, I mean . . .

LV: Yes, and they cut, and then we had a sandstorm. (laughter) Like you wouldn't believe out there. (laughter) Gee, it blew. And I remember the band gathered up everything because they didn't want their instruments, naturally, ruined by it. But, oh, gee, what an evening! What an evening!

BV: But anyway, that's how Bob Hope Drive happened to get over there that early. And then nobody uses it anyway.

I mean they still put their grapes down Indio. (laughter)

PY: Oh, they thought they were going to ship them directly from

LV: Yes.

BV: Yes, they had a siding. Kersten, especially Kersten had a hundred, over a hundred acres of grapes himself. And all this other. And Gurley, he packed his grapes right here.

LV: He had a packing house.

BV: At Clancey Lane, just off Clancey Lane. So they convinced the supervisors that they needed a road over there to that ranch. (laughter) Actually, it made a way that we could get out when the wash. That was one of the main things. Because then we could go on over the sand dunes and at least get over there to Thousand Palms. And then down to Indio.

PY: Was that a fear, I mean a concern?

LV: Well, yes, because you couldn't get to the grocery store.

BV: Yes. Now here's another thing. If, and we did have heavy rains during grape season, if that occurred and the trucks couldn't get in to pick up the grapes, well, they couldn't take them down to Indio. They'd lose the fruit. So it was pretty serious. They needed something to come in on that wouldn't be washed out every storm. And these grapes are late up here, of course, and they're normally picked in July. And that's when we a lot of times get our summer rain, like July 20th last year.

PY: Big one that got him.

BV: Do you remember that one?

PY: Yes.

LV: But you know this is good soil for that type of thing.

It absorbs it. Now we did have water surrounding the house. I mean, we had a little come in the front door that was coming by, but it was going right out there in the citrus, ex-citrus grove. But we just took some towels and we just wrung them out. We didn't have to rush at it exactly, but that's all the damage we had except for all the debris that came in. But we did absorb it here.

PY: Bill Gray, who managed some ranches down in Indian Wells, was saying that when he was working in the early forties when he was working in the Indian Wells area.

LV: I'll get you some more.

PY: Oh, I'm fine. I guess, even after the war he was saying that most of the work hands, particularly in the dates, were at that time people from Oklahoma and Arkansas, and that he really didn't see any Mexicans until he said later. Was that true here?

BV: Well, after the war, when I first came down here, there were a lot of families that had come from, I think it was

Lake View, Arkansas. And they worked this whole area. And the trees were at that time, you know, they weren't very tall, not as tall as they are now. So they were able to keep up with the operation. But then the wetbacks started drifting in. And, of course, you could pay a wetback anything you wanted to, and they were willing to work. So a little later then there were enough of them that came up and were doing date work that they started the becerro program where they brought them in legally and let them stay for six to eight months, possibly a year. And it wasn't very long after that that the trees were getting so high that it was hard to get these other people to work. In fact, you never see one of those boys up there now. I don't know where it would be. Even though they might ride one of these baskets in these derricks there now, but they wouldn't climb the trees. So it was during the late forties and early fifties the Mexican workers took over.

PY: Comment from the peanut gallery. Are they still climbing trees?

BV: They still use ladders. Yes. All these trees out here worked by a ladder. Now this next grove they use a crane,

you know, baskets.

PY: What determines that?

BV: Well, you see, most growers can't afford a mechanical thing, but Cal-Date, for example, has, I don't know, a couple thousand acres of grapes, or a thousand acres of dates. They're able to support these machines. And little outfit, like we let these Mexican boys worked at our trees just for the care of the trees. Keep them trimmed and so on and so forth. And they can use a ladder, that's all they can use.

PY: And do they still pick the dates as they ripen, or do they pick them all at once then?

BV: Well, now the deal is they get a fairly high percentage of ripe and they cut the stem and lower the bunch down. Now these guys still pick, though.

LV: No.

BV: In buckets. Yes. First pick.

LV: Do they?

BV: Yes. And they put the stems in a bin and let them ripen like Cal-Date does it on a big scale. But these guys still put them in these little lug boxes, so they have to pick them.

PY: So are they dehydrating in them at all?

LV: No.

BV: Well.

LV: Only ones

BV: They dehydrate, a lot of dates are just naturally dry up there before they pick them or before the biggest percentage of them are ripe. So those they dehydrate.

I mean hydrate.

LV: Hydrate, yes.

BV: Yes, hydrate.

END OF INTERVIEW